DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 197 EC 100 772

AUTHOR Ardi, Dana B.
TITLE New Avenues of Teaching Resources--Sesame Street Programs for the Mentally Retarded Child.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Convention, The Council for Exceptional Children (55th, Atlanta, Georgia, April 11-15, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attention; *Educational Television; Elementary Education; Exceptional Child Research; *Mentally Handicapped; Preschool Education; *Program Evaluation; *Self Concept; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Sesame Street

ABSTRACT

Evaluated with 173 mentally retarded (MR) children (4 to 12 years old), 45 day care program children (mean age 4.3 years), and 45 second graders were the Sesame Street "Play to Grow" materials designed to foster positive self-image of retarded children. During sample tape presentations, children's visual attention, verbal comments, and motoric behavior were recorded. Among findings were that attention of both MR and normal samples averaged from "high moderate" to "very attentive"; that MR children were more involved with their viewing; that children's comprehension of "Play to Grow" segments was excellent; and that although normal second graders were very aware of the differences in the way the MR children went about performing "Play to Grow" activities, bias and prejudice could not be detected. (A list of the program's values and a sample segment outline are provided.) (SBH)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED139197

PS 8
Session 242

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

NEW AVENUES OF TEACHING RESOURCES -

SESAME STREET PROGRAMS FOR THE MENTALLY RETARDED CHILD

Dana B. Ardi
Instructor in Special Education
Fordham University,
New York, New York

55th Annual International C.E.C. Convention-Atlanta

April, 1977

EC100 772

New Avenues of Teaching Resources -
Sesame Street Programs for the Mentally Retarded Child

As a special educator I had often reflected on the effectiveness of television in reaching populations of children with retarded mental development. I felt that the "electronic media" stimulated the mentally retarded child's interest and broadened the child's conception of the world. I believed television, by the nature of its simultaneous channels of communication, provided mentally retarded children with more pertinent and immediate information. Television's multi-modal presentations, I believed, would be highly effective in attracting and maintaining the attention of mentally retarded children.

More specifically, I had always felt that Sesame Street, with its short messages, continual repetitions, variety of forms of music, and diversity of program elements, would be successful in transmitting and reinforcing its curriculum goals to mentally retarded viewers. I was delighted when I was approached by the research staff and asked to help them begin to evaluate the "Play to Grow" materials.

My initial reaction to the segments varied. I felt that the "Play to Grow" strategy, that of fostering positive self-image of retarded children by simple, straightforward activities directed toward motor goals, was a good one. I sensed, however, that the cognitive abilities of mentally retarded children had been underestimated. I felt that when the objectives of the

segment were clear, such as in the feather blowing game or in a counting and clapping segment, there would be great success in communicating. But in segments such as "What Makes You Happy" and "Feel Box", segments where objectives competed or were unclear, there would be little success.

I also reacted to the overt displays of reinforcement and affection towards the "mentally retarded" children by the cast members. I felt that negative stereotypes of retarded children would be perpetuated, and that the physical affection would obscure the goal of the segment, for example, "Follow the Leader" and "Over and Under."

What became apparent was a need to begin to quantify some of our feelings and reactions. A formative evaluation study was designed with the following goals in mind:

1. To evaluate the extent to which children with retarded mental development attend and comprehend Sesame Street "Play to Grow" materials.

2. To evaluate the extent to which retarded children attend or comprehend a subset of regular Sesame Street program materials.

3. To evaluate non-retarded viewers' perceptions and reactions to the retarded children presented on Sesame Street.

Let me now discuss the components of our research. Our first concern was attention. Specially designed test tapes were prepared simulating 20 minutes of show time. Each of the tapes were constructed to include several "Play to Grow" segments as well as a sampling of segments from Sesame Street programming.

Two samples of children viewed the stimulus tapes. The first sample included 91 children who were attending segregated school programs for children with retarded mental development. The children ranged in age from 4 to 12 years, with developmental ages from 18 months to 8 years. The population was quite diverse, relative to verbal and cognitive ability and etiological basis. The second sample included 45 children attending day care programs. To our knowledge, none of the children were recognized as being mentally retarded. The mean age of the day care sample was 4.3 years.

Each child in either of the two samples watched the stimulus tapes as a member of a small viewing group. Carefully trained observers recorded children's visual attention to the television program materials. Children's verbal comments and motoric behavior were also recorded. A predetermined scoring procedure with categories measuring attention from inattentive to very attentive was utilized.

In analyzing our results, we found that, in general, attention of children in both samples averaged from "high moderate" to "very attentive." We found that there was no significant correlation between the length of the segments and the degree of attention. Interestingly, "What Makes You Happy" received the lowest rating of any segment for both samples.

It is interesting to note that prior to designing the study, it had been speculated that mentally retarded children have short attention spans and would have difficulty in directing their attention to the relevant dimensions of a problem. Our

results, however, do not confirm consultants' speculations. The retarded children were consistently attentive, and an examination of the children's verbal and nonverbal participations (e.g., pointing things out, naming people and objects, counting, etc.) indicated that the children were able to direct attention to relevant dimensions.

An interesting finding was the striking difference in the extent of verbal and nonverbal response. Results indicate that mentally retarded children were more involved with their viewing. The mentally retarded viewer would move to the music, call out letters and numbers, and engage in modeling the activity on screen (for example, "Bell Ringing Silly Song," "Harry's Exercise," "Feather Game," etc.) In comparison to the mentally retarded children, low levels of participation were recorded for our sample of pre-schoolers.

A plausible explanation for the high degree of participation by the mentally retarded children may be found if we examine the focus of educational programming for this population. Typically, curriculum goals for young retarded children 1) encourage the development of speech and language; 2) stress social interaction and adaptation; and 3) encourage physical participations that stimulate motor development. Thus, Sesame Street appears to reinforce for the young retarded child what has been instilled in school.

The success of Sesame Street in involving the "special needs" children with the programming material is an encouraging finding. The finding of high involvement by mentally retarded

children indicates that the use of Sesame Street as an instructional resource is viable and valuable. Results indicate that Sesame Street would be of great value as an integrated component of a multi-sensory approach to the education of young children with retarded mental development.

Prior to the development of the "Play to Grow" materials, it was speculated that slow paced, visually sparse materials with distracting elements removed would be most appropriate for the "special needs" population. An examination of the data, however, reveals that those segments that are among the most successful in maintaining attention and eliciting participation are also those which can be considered visually complex, with many distracting elements, for example, "Play to Grow Bridge," and "Computer Animation 'H'."

Our second research goal was to evaluate the extent to which children with retarded mental development comprehend the physical and cognitive goals of the "Play to Grow" segments. Comprehension data was collected on twelve "Play to Grow" segments. 82 children diagnostically classified as mentally retarded served as subjects. Children ranged in age from 4 to 12 years, with developmental levels from 18 months to 8 years. Each child was tested individually. Comprehension testing presented itself as a dilemma due to the diversity of developmental levels and varying verbal ability levels of children in the sample.

In order to provide maximum opportunity for participation by our sample in the comprehension component, it was decided that a hierarchy of response modes would be developed for each segment.

The hierarchies, developed to allow children to demonstrate comprehension relative to their ability to respond, were designed on four levels:

1. Verbal level: ask child question and expect verbal response, i.e., "What was Big Bird doing?"

2. Comprehension with photo prompt: children verbally or nonverbally indicated comprehension after viewing a photograph taken from the segment. A question by a researcher accompanied the photograph.

3. Comprehension by participation: children verbally or nonverbally demonstrated comprehension after they were presented with an actual prop taken from the segment. Comprehension was measured by observing the child's interaction with the prop. In some cases the prop was a physical object, such as a feather. In other cases a tape recording of the audio portion of the segment was played for the child.

4. The final level called for modeling of the activity. Comprehension was recorded by observing the child's interaction with an examiner who modeled the activity of the "Play to Grow" segment.

Our results indicate that the children's comprehension of the "Play to Grow" segments was excellent. Testers reported that the children not only recognized familiar physical activities and expressed a desire to participate, but by and large recognized the cognitive demands of the task (counting, recognition of body parts, etc.), if such concepts accompanied the physical goal. The concrete presentations of the motor goals on the "Play to Grow"

segments was felt by the researchers to be responsible for the children's mastery of the physical activity. The comprehension data seems to reflect that the strategy of presenting physical activities that are non-threatening, where mastery of the task can reinforce self-image, was successful.

Analysis of the data leads us to the conclusion that future programming for mentally retarded children can consider higher level developmental goals in both the physical and cognitive domains than had previously been anticipated.

Our final research goal was to evaluate the extent to which non-retarded viewers perceive and react to the retarded children who are participants in a sampling of "Play to Grow" segments. After much deliberation by the Sesame Street research team, it was decided that second graders would be used for this section of the study. The second graders were chosen because we felt that they were apt to provide us with verbal feedback.

Forty-five second graders viewed test tapes composed of "Play to Grow" segments individually. Data on six "Play to Grow" segments was collected. Among these were two "Follow the Leader" segments, "Special Olympics" and "Feather Blowing." The children were asked a series of questions based on their viewing of each "Play to Grow" segment. Some of the questions were designed to assess the children's desire to become involved in the activity, or to assess their impressions of the desirability of participation in the activity, for example, "do you think the kids are enjoying the game?" Other questions were designed to elicit from the children their responses and impressions of children seen on

screen. These questions followed a sociometric format, and attempted to have the children comment on the child they liked the most or the least, or the children in the scene they would most like to play with. Still other questions focused the viewers' attention on one of the "mentally retarded" children, and attempted to elicit the second graders' perceptions of that child (for example, "This is _____. What can you tell me about _____?).

The data discloses that the children in our sample were very aware of the differences in the way the "mentally retarded" children went about performing the "Play to Grow" activities. The second graders could not, however, label the reasons for differences in performance. Rarely was any comment made about the physical characteristics of the mentally retarded children (Down's Syndrome). The second graders' comments regarding physical difference focused in on size. The second graders did acknowledge differences in physical competance, and were aware of the speech and language difficulties of some of the children on screen.

Even though the second graders were aware of differences, we could not detect resulting bias and prejudice. Many of the second graders chose the mentally retarded children as those they desired to play with. The viewers were extremely sensitive to the way the cast members and muppets related to various children on the set. The viewers were very aware of the nature of the interaction between the handicapped children and familiar Sesame Street residents. The data reveals that the role model

provided by the cast was of the utmost importance in the formulation of the second graders' attitudes. Above all, the absence of results reflecting negative attitudes or stigma is most encouraging. It is our hope that the integration of retarded children on Sesame Street will create an understanding and tolerance for individual differences.

Let me close with these reflections emphasizing the value of Sesame Street experiments in programming for mentally retarded children:

1. By showing mentally retarded children succeeding at various tasks, many of the myths held about this population have been put to rest. Mental retardation is a developmental disability, not necessarily an inability.

2. We know that mentally retarded children (as well as all children) spend many hours as passive television observers. Now Sesame Street has attempted, and from our research results - succeeded, in involving children in physical activity as they interact with the "Play to Grow" segments.

3. Programming for children with retarded mental development highlights the fact that individuals have strengths and weaknesses - that individual differences exist. We begin to see that we can all learn from each other.

4. Parents have fought for acceptance and for the rights of their exceptional children. By showing mentally retarded children as participants on Sesame Street, this population has

been accepted as members of the community. "Play to Grow" has enhanced the self-esteem of the exceptional parent and family.

5. The "Play to Grow" experiment enhances the current emphasis on mainstreaming - the integration of children with "special learning needs."

6. Throughout the mentally retarded population, there is a high preponderance of poor motor skills. By encouraging participation in the "Play to Grow" segments on Sesame Street, a common goal of physical growth and motor stimulation for children with retarded mental development has been advanced.

Sesame Street has truly provided new avenues of learning for mentally retarded children in its viewing audience.

A Sample of "Play to Grow" Segments
and Segment Goals

Item	Title	Time	Goal
1.	Play to Grow Bridge *	:20	_____
2.	Feather blowing	1:15	Relational concepts: up/down; Social interaction/cooperation
3.	Bell Ringing Silly Song	2:31	Manual dexterity; following directions/auditory cue
4.	Follow the Leader I	3:10	Body parts; following directions
5.	Follow the Leader II	2:57	Body parts; following directions
6.	Special Olympics	1:09	Gross motor coordination pride/self-image; differing perspectives
7.	What Makes you Happy	1:26	Pride/self-image
8.	Computer Animation H **	1:58	Letter name; letter sour
9.	Telephone Rock **	3:22	Sightword: Telephone
10.	Gymnastics	1:40	Gross motor coordination Pride/self-image; differing perspectives
11.	Dressing for Rain	3:44	Self-help skills; Reasoning & Problem solving
12.	Carnival (Merry Go Round)	2:33	Imagination; differing perspectives; Motor coordination; cooperatic

* Standard cue to introduce each "Play to Grow" segment.

** Regular Sesame Street segment.